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Whining about North Korea makes matters worse

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WASHINGTON – Washington has long told the rest of the world what to do. But the world usually pays little attention. When ignored, U.S. officials typically talk tougher and louder, with no better result.

That describes American policy toward North Korea. It would be better for Washington to less than frantically denounce every provocation. The U.S. and its allies typically respond with angry complaints and empty threats, which only encourages North Korea to provoke again.

North Korea recently launched two missiles. One exploded shortly after launch, while the other landed about 260 km from Japan. It was more of the same, barely worth a second thought.

However, U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon declared that he was “deeply troubled” by the North’s action. The U.N. Security Council met, at which there were “strong condemnations across the board,” according to U.S. Ambassador Samantha Power.

Pentagon spokesman Gary Ross said, “This provocation only serves to increase the international community’s resolve to counter prohibited activities.” Pyongyang should “focus instead on taking concrete steps toward fulfilling its commitments and international obligations.”

Japan’s U.N. representative, Koro Bessho, called the North’s actions “totally unacceptable.” Prime Minister Shinzo Abe termed the test “an unforgivable act of violence toward Japan’s security.” He said he expected “resolute measures” in response.

South Korea’s U.N. representative, Oh Joon, denounced Pyongyang, contending that its missile program “poses a clear and present danger to the security of all countries in the region.” Everyone, he added, has an interest in stopping “this dangerous series of provocations immediately.” The South Korean military warned that the North “directly and blatantly demonstrated its provocative ambition to target seaports and airfields across South Korea.”

Even NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg joined the chorus, taking the “North Atlantic” Treaty Organization way out of area. He declared that North Korea should “immediately cease and abandon all its existing nuclear and ballistic missile activities” and “refrain from any further provocative actions.”

Imagine, Stoltenberg thought his words would shame into repentance the North’s communist emperor, Kim Jong Un, fresh from executing the managers of a Chinese restaurant whose staff had defected. Alas, the rebuke from the Pentagon was even less likely to cause Pyongyang to

reverse course. Kim & Co. seem far more likely to enjoy than regret Japanese ululations over the horrid threat posed by Tokyo's former colony.

Just what do the allies believe they are achieving? Over the last five years North Korea has shot off 31 missiles. Every one violated a Security Council resolution. And every one was denounced in equally florid language.

Without the slightest impact on the North's behavior.

In fact, North Korea is far better at loosing insults. Moreover, Western whining plays to Kim's worst instincts.

After all, the North ably fills the role of a "shrimp among whales," far smaller, poorer and less powerful than South Korea, let alone Japan, China and Russia. Yet the Kim dynasty has gained the world's attention, causing wailing and gnashing of teeth in capitals across the world — and now even in the headquarters of NATO, the world's greatest military alliance.

From the regime's standpoint, it obviously is doing something right. In fact, observers predict that the North is preparing a fifth nuclear test. Last month Foreign Minister Ri Yong Ho criticized the U.S. for its "never-ending nuclear blackmails." As a result, America "will have to pay dearly a terrifying price."

Washington and nations in the region cannot count on China to "solve" the North Korea problem. After the latest Pyongyang provocations, Beijing's ambassador to the U.N., Liu Jieyi, chose not to focus on the North but instead said that "the situation is tense and we need to do everything to de-escalate the situation." He implied that the U.S. and its allies had provoked the North to arm, noting that "the factors contributing to the tension in the Korean Peninsula" are "self-evident."

No one outside Pyongyang wants North Korea to develop missiles or nuclear weapons. However, if the allies lack the means to disarm the North, they should stop wailing after every weapons test. Doing so reinforces North Korea's inflated sense of importance and perception of allied weakness.

Better would be to greet such tests with silence. Any policy response, such as tightened sanctions, should be adopted with little rhetorical fanfare.

This wouldn't make the North Korea problem go away. But it might at least stop encouraging Pyongyang to do more. The U.S. and its allies should give the North the attention that it truly deserves.

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